

# Gather your own grape leaves

A few weeks ago, avocados were selling at four for \$1 at a local market — an incredible bargain! Since I had been saving an avocado salad recipe for just such an occasion, I bought four. Reviewing the recipe at home, I discovered I lacked one ingredient — a special French mustard.

At least five stores later, I finally found the missing ingredient — at \$6 a jar. So much for my bargain.

I often run into this kind of a situation — especially with ethnic recipes. Peasant dishes, casseroles "in the manner of the thrifty housewife" — this type of fare frequently becomes expensive gourmet food in the process of crossing the ocean.

A mushroom that grows wild in France, a fish found abundantly off the coast of Ireland, a variety of hot pepper heaped high in open-air Mexican markets — all become elusive and exorbitant imported luxuries outside of their native habitats.

There are times when this perverse price escalation can be thwarted, however. An example is Greek stuffed grape leaves. Imported grape leaves are available in jars — in small quantities for inflated prices.

Fresh grape leaves are also available locally for the picking in late spring and summer. You may have grape vines in your own back yard. If not, check with your neighbors, along roadsides or in parks.

The vines you are looking for are wild. Domestic vines (those which actually bear grapes) produce leaves that are tough and inedible.

**THE ONE TIME** I had ever picked grape leaves was from an accommodating neighbor's fruit-bearing vines. Billy Bassaras, an excellent cook — particularly skilled in his native Greek cuisine — was kind enough to explain the distinction between wild and domestic grape leaves and to share his recipe for stuffed grape leaves.

Luckily, the domestic leaves I had picked were only to tuck in a jar of pickles. If the leaves had been stuffed instead, the result would have been a waste of ingredients — not too bad since the leaves were free and the rice inexpensive — and hours of work.

That's the catch. The stuffed grape leaves are delicious and inexpensive but very time-consuming. Your best bet would be to recruit eager (or even reluctant) family and friends for an afternoon of leaf-picking and stuffing.

This social approach must surely be the one taken in Greek villages or their women would never be willing to endure the tedium of producing the involved foods that make up the complex, wonderful Greek cuisine.

Whether alone or in good company, once you have found a source of wild grape leaves, Billy Bassaras recommends that you pick "a ton." Any surplus can be wrapped, unwashed, in foil packets and frozen. When ready to serve, simply thaw the leaves, rinse well and cook.

The stuffed grape leaves can be served cold as an appetizer preceding an authentic Greek meal. You might want to finish such a meal with the marvelous Greek pastry, baklava. The best baklava is, of course, produced in the home.

Billy Bassaras makes his own — far superior to anything found in the stores and restaurants of Greektown.

**PART OF HIS** secret lies in the use of clarified butter. He recommends Land O'Lakes as having a better flavor, higher butterfat content and less water than other brands. (This is an observation I have heard from other discriminating cooks.)

In order to keep the pastry from crushing as you attempt to slice it, he suggests placing the pan of unbaked baklava in the freezer just long enough to freeze the layers of butter.

## STUFFED GRAPE LEAVES

1 jar vine leaves or 40-50 fresh wild grape leaves

¾ cup raw rice

2 onions, finely chopped

1 tsp. finely chopped parsley

1 tsp. chopped fresh dill

Juice from 2 lemons

1 lemon, thinly sliced

1 cup water

¾ cup olive oil

Salt and pepper

If using leaves from a jar, scald the leaves with hot water and drain. If using fresh leaves, rinse well and drop into a pot of boiling water. Remove the pan from the heat and allow to stand for 5 minutes. Drain. Cut off stems carefully from the leaves and drape over the edge of the colander to further drain.

In a skillet, sauté the onions and parsley in 2 tablespoons hot olive oil; add rice, dill, salt and pepper to taste. Cook and simmer for 10 minutes. Set aside and cool. When cool stir in juice from the two lemons.

To wrap: Take a small, flat plate and brush with oil. Place leaf, shiny side down, with point of leaf facing away from you. Place 1 tablespoon of rice mixture in center of leaf. Fold each side of leaf in and roll up from the bottom as if rolling a cigar. Do not roll too tightly as rice expands during cooking and may split your leaves open.

Spread 2 tablespoons of olive oil in the bottom of a 5-quart pan and layer bottom with any leaves that may be torn or too small to use. Begin wrapping and layering stuffed grape leaves in pot. Lay lemon slices over each layer and sprinkle with a little olive oil. Pour water and any remaining oil over all the leaves. Place a plate on top (inverted) to weight them down and cover. Simmer over very low heat for 40-50 minutes. Remove, drain and cool before serving. To serve, arrange stuffed leaves on a large plate garnished with lemon slices and accompanied with a dish of yogurt seasoned with fresh dill.

## GREEK WEDDING COOKIES

(Kourambietes)

1 lb. clarified butter

1 egg yolk

2 tsp. confectioners' sugar

1 tsp. vanilla or whiskey

1 tsp. baking powder

5 cups sifted flour (approx.)

Refrigerate clarified butter until slightly hardened. Remove from refrigerator and, using electric mixer, beat butter until it is very white and resembles whipping cream. Stir in egg yolk and 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar, vanilla and baking powder. Add flour and mix thoroughly, but be careful that you do not "manhandle" the dough or overwork it. Do not refrigerate unless you plan on using later. If refrigerated, allow the dough to return to room temperature before continuing. Shape the dough into little balls about ¾ of an inch in diameter and slightly flatten on cookie sheets and bake at



## A Question of Taste

By Hilary Keating Callaghan

350° for 15 minutes or until golden brown. Remove carefully from sheets and place on waxed paper to cool.

Sprinkle a very little ground cinnamon or cloves over tops of cookies. Sift a small amount of confectioners' sugar over tops, when thoroughly cooled, cover with sifted confectioners' sugar. Place 2 or 3 cookies in colored paper cups (muffin type) and arrange on large serving plate. May be stored in airtight container for several weeks.

## Cookout with lamb

As the cooking scene shifts outdoors to the patio or backyard, be sure to include lamb in your barbecuing plans. To help keep within the food budget, choose economical arm and blade lamb chops to cook over the coals. They are delicious simply broiled and seasoned. Or brush them with a tangy barbecue sauce or a favorite fruit glaze.

When cooking lamb on the grill, remember that the temperature should be low to moderate. You'll know the fire is ready when the coals are covered with a gray ash.

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